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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 000081

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AF/S FOR S. HILL,
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STATE PASS TO USAID FOR E. LOKEN AND L. DOBBINS
STATE PASS TO NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR B. PITTMAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/29/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV ASEC ZI

SUBJECT: SADC TALKS DEAD; MDC TO CONSIDER PARTICIPATION IN ELECTION

REF: A) HARARE 70 B) HARARE 46 C) PRETORIA 152

Classified By: Amb. James D. McGee for reason 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (Mutambara faction) secretary general Welshman Ncube believes Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe has effectively killed the SADC talks, and that SADC is afraid to challenge Mugabe's peremptory dismissal of South African president Thabo Mbeki and his mediation efforts. Leaders of both factions favor an election boycott in an effort to create a "tipping point" in the Zimbabwean situation, but a reconciled MDC is likely to decide to participate in the March 29 elections. END
SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Ncube told polecon chief on January 29 that ZANU-PF had engaged in "provocative" behavior over the last 10 days by declaring an early nomination date (February 8) and election date (March 29) that do not give the MDC time to evaluate the recently completed delimitation exercise, inspect voter rolls, and select candidates. By acting peremptorily, according to Ncube, Mugabe had effectively ended the SADC mediation process. The SADC process was dead and the only question was how Mbeki would bury it.

¶3. (C) Ncube noted that Mbeki had sent his chief mediator, Sydney Mufamadi, last week to attempt to revive the talks by arranging a meeting between Mugabe and MDC presidents Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara and continued to press Mugabe

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on the issue. Mugabe was refusing to meet with them--he insisted he could not meet with Tsvangirai who was disputing his legitimacy through a still-pending challenge to the 2003 presidential election results--and now even refused to take

Mbeki's phone calls. The MDC had appealed to SADC, but SADC, in Ncube's opinion, was weak and would not challenge a sitting leader.

¶4. (C) According to Ncube, the MDC was unprepared for the elections and was certain to lose. He and the leadership of his faction, including president Arthur Mutambara, favored a boycott. The MDC had engaged in an incremental strategy, including participating in elections, for the last eight years and had gone nowhere. Acknowledging that the MDC had no alternative strategy in the event of a boycott, Ncube said a boycott might produce a "tipping point" and an unknown succession of events that might be preferable to the status quo. But Ncube believed his faction's national council favored participation.

¶5. (C) Ncube stated that Tsvangirai and his secretary general, Tendai Biti, also favored a boycott, but Tsvangirai's "kitchen cabinet" and a majority of his national

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council favored participation. Reasons articulated for participation in both factions included lack of an alternative program in the event of a boycott; fear that the MDC would cease to exist (as had occurred with boycotting parties in other African countries); the opportunity for ZANU-PF to establish footholds in areas that would no longer have MDC parliamentarians, causing diminution of MDC strength in these areas; and the fact that the absence of a challenge to ZANU-PF would allow that party to conserve resources. Ncube did not feel the decision was being driven by parliamentarians who favored participation in order to keep their seats; a number of parliamentarians favored a boycott.

¶6. (C) Ncube said the national councils of both MDC factions would meet later this week to vote on the agreement reached

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by standing committees of each faction to act as a coalition, and to reunify no earlier than April 2009. He expected the national councils would then meet jointly to decide on whether or not to participate in the March elections. He believed the decision would be to participate.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) As we have pointed out (Ref B), the MDC is in a no-win situation. If it participates and loses, it will in some measure confer legitimacy upon Mugabe--particularly if, as possibly is the case (Septel), the GOZ allows international observation of the elections. If the MDC boycotts, it risks its continuing viability as a party. In any event, attention is beginning to shift to post-election ZANU-PF and succession. END COMMENT.

MCGEE